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BLOG POST

Greenland: How to break the impasse

I • The Easy Solution

Trump's threat regarding Greenland presents a strange paradox. On the one hand, this is an issue that should be easier to address than many others. The shared Western interest is in fact obvious.

Regardless of how one judges the urgency of the risk of a Russian or Chinese invasion invoked by Trump to justify his initiative, there is no doubt that the Arctic will, in the years to come, represent one of the most important strategic challenges for us all. It is therefore in the common interest to define a shared transatlantic strategy, including the means necessary to make it credible. This could simply require NATO to take action, with the support of its members. Denmark's consent would be assured. Moreover, Europeans, Americans, Canadians, and perhaps other Western allies would be able to define a common strategy for exploiting the territory's immense potential in raw materials. This should be subject, however, to two precautionary tales.

The first is that while the potential is immense, so are the difficulties and costs. The second is that everything must be done in full respect of the rights of the people of Greenland, who retain unhappy memories of their colonial experience with Denmark. Finally, the EU could offer Greenland a closer form of association, which would be beneficial to both sides. This would work, provided that Brussels resists the temptation to attach conditions that would be difficult for Greenland to accept, for example in the area of fishing rights. Such a strategic and economic approach would also respond to a clear interest among Greenlanders, who while not wishing to sever their ties with Denmark and Europe, also have a strong interest in strengthening those with the United States and Canada.



II • But Trump...

rump, by contrast, frames the issue in terms of sovereignty, or rather, like a real-estate expert, in terms of “ownership.” In doing so, he crosses a red line for Denmark and for Europe’s allies, one that has no strategic or economic justification. The matter thus becomes a purely imperial impulse, which is unacceptable to allies as such. If Trump were to pursue his intentions in practical terms, he could theoretically follow four paths, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

The first would be to “buy” the consent of the people of Greenland. A prospect to which Denmark, and therefore the other Europeans, could not object. Given the state of local public opinion, however, this option appears unlikely to succeed. The second would be to “buy” Greenland directly from Denmark. This is the logic behind the threatened tariffs against Denmark and the countries that most openly support it. Here again, there is an obvious attempt to divide the Europeans. In an escalatory direction, the third option would be to exert strong and explicit pressure on the continuation of US support for Ukraine. The fourth would consist of a straightforward military occupation of the territory. In the last two cases, reality suggests that Europeans would find themselves in a completely weak and idle position. It would in fact be impossible to successfully counter a military intervention. Moreover, at least in the short term, support for Ukraine in the face of Russian aggression needs American participation to be credible. Security guarantees required in the event of a ceasefire would need also American participation to be credible. The dilemma facing Europeans is therefore clear: what should be done?

III • Deterrence

Europe must adapt its responses to Trump’s initiatives but, to be credible, must take all scenarios into account. In the immediate term, it is necessary to respond firmly to the threat of tariffs, particularly while awaiting the imminent ruling of the Supreme Court. At the same time, a more complex strategy is required. One whose objective would be to increase Trump’s domestic political cost and force him back toward a consensual agreement-based approach. This path is far from unachievable. The popularity of the imperial impulses contained in the recent national security document is in fact low among Americans, including within Trump’s MAGA electorate.

The key lies in Congress, where the absolute priority for Republican members are the midterm elections. So far, potential dissent, both internal and external, regarding Trump’s initiatives has been neutralized by the considerable influence he continues to wield over Republican media outlets and party donors. Yet such passivity is not without internal tension, and there are signs that it is beginning to crack. This was evident in debates over Ukraine. More recently, and more visibly, it has emerged around attacks on the independence of the Federal Reserve and over Venezuela.

On the latter issue, a bipartisan motion that would have imposed constraints on the President’s freedom of action was blocked in the Senate by a 50–50 vote, decided by the Vice President’s tie-breaking vote. Two Republican senators, whose support would have been decisive for a different outcome, were convinced at the last minute by Secretary of State Marco Rubio solely on the guarantee that the Venezuelan military intervention was exceptional, short-lived, and that any further steps would respect “the constitutional prerogatives of Congress.”

It is reasonable to assume that such justification would be unacceptable in the case of an intervention in Greenland, a prospect that would in any case be highly unpopular with US public opinion. There is therefore significant room for Europeans to add diplomatic and communication-based pressures.

Still, to achieve such an outcome, Europe must be credible. In substance, this means intensifying, without deviation and while maintaining the greatest possible unity, the course already underway, built around several components. First, an unequivocal refusal to yield on the issue of sovereignty; explaining, as the Danish Prime Minister has done, that a military intervention against the sovereignty of a member country would have devastating consequences for NATO. Second, reiterating readiness to define an effective Arctic strategy within NATO. Third, increasing the European military presence in Greenland. This presence should be more than symbolic, even though we know it would not be sufficient to counter an American intervention. Nevertheless, the potential loss of allied lives would carry significant weight with US public opinion. That this could be an effective measure is further demonstrated by the fact that Trump has chosen to target, through tariffs, the European countries that have deployed troops to Greenland.

Nothing is, of course, guaranteed. Yet everything suggests that such a strategy, if pursued with determination, maximum unity, and possibly extended to Canada, could prove effective.